DAVID MURRAY SOLO TRANSCRIPTION

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# down beat

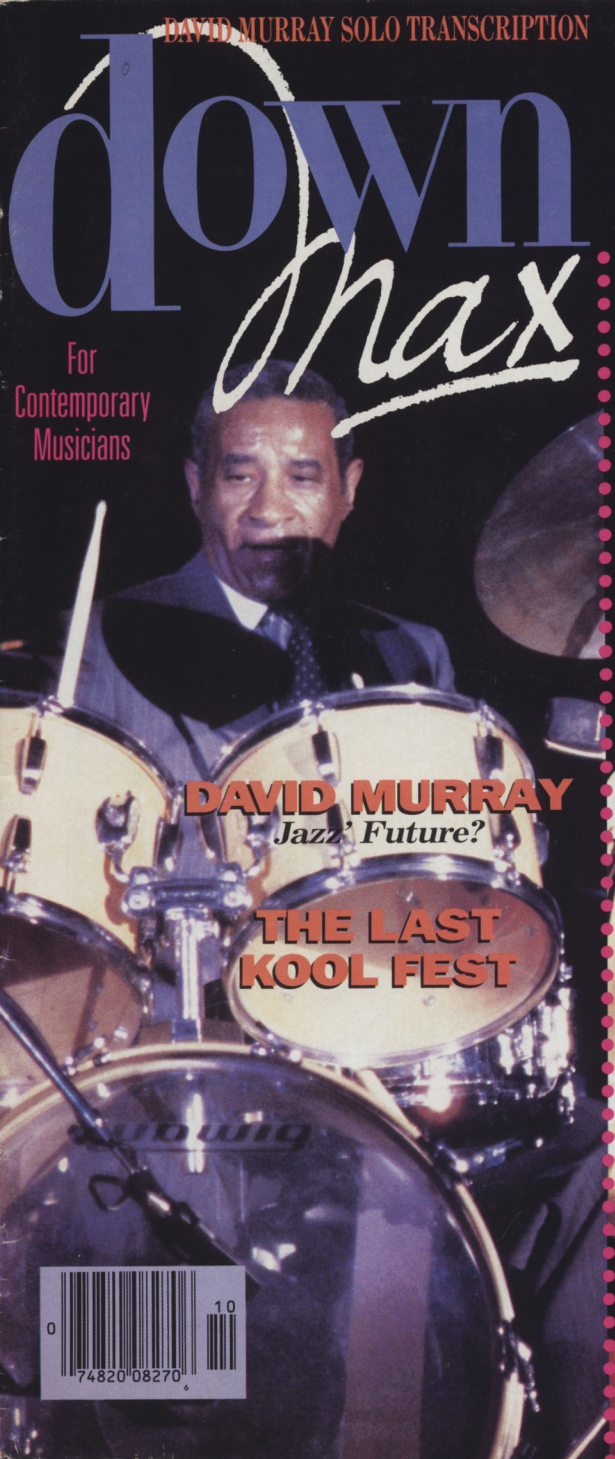
## Max

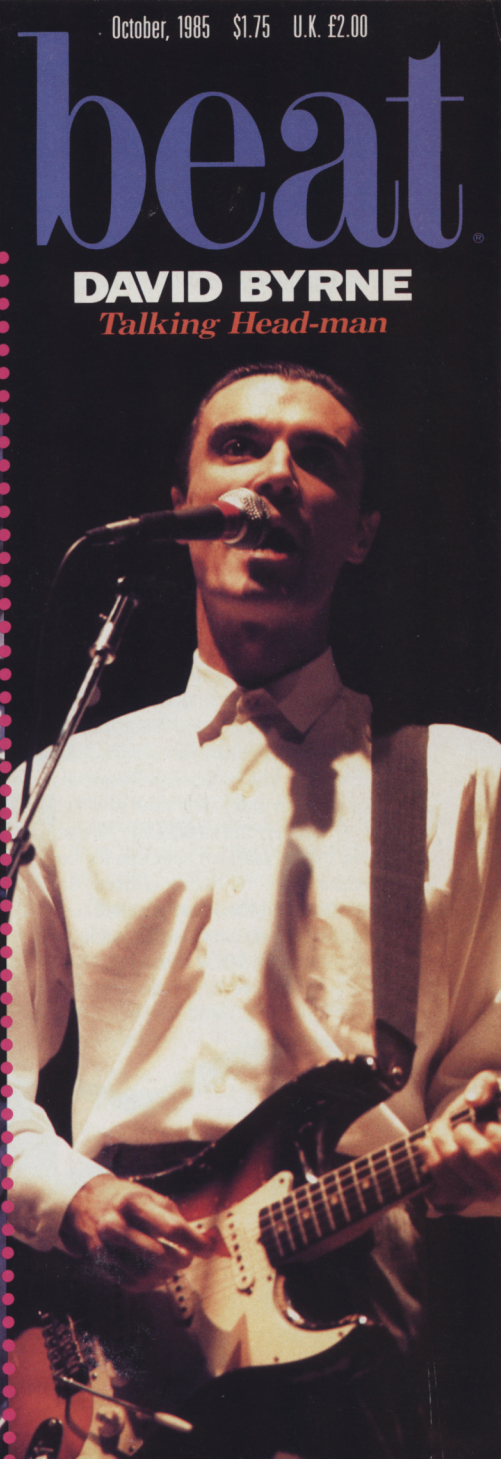
For Contemporary Musicians

**DAVID BYRNE**
*Talking Head-man*

**DAVID MURRAY**
*Jazz' Future?*

**THE LAST KOOL FEST**





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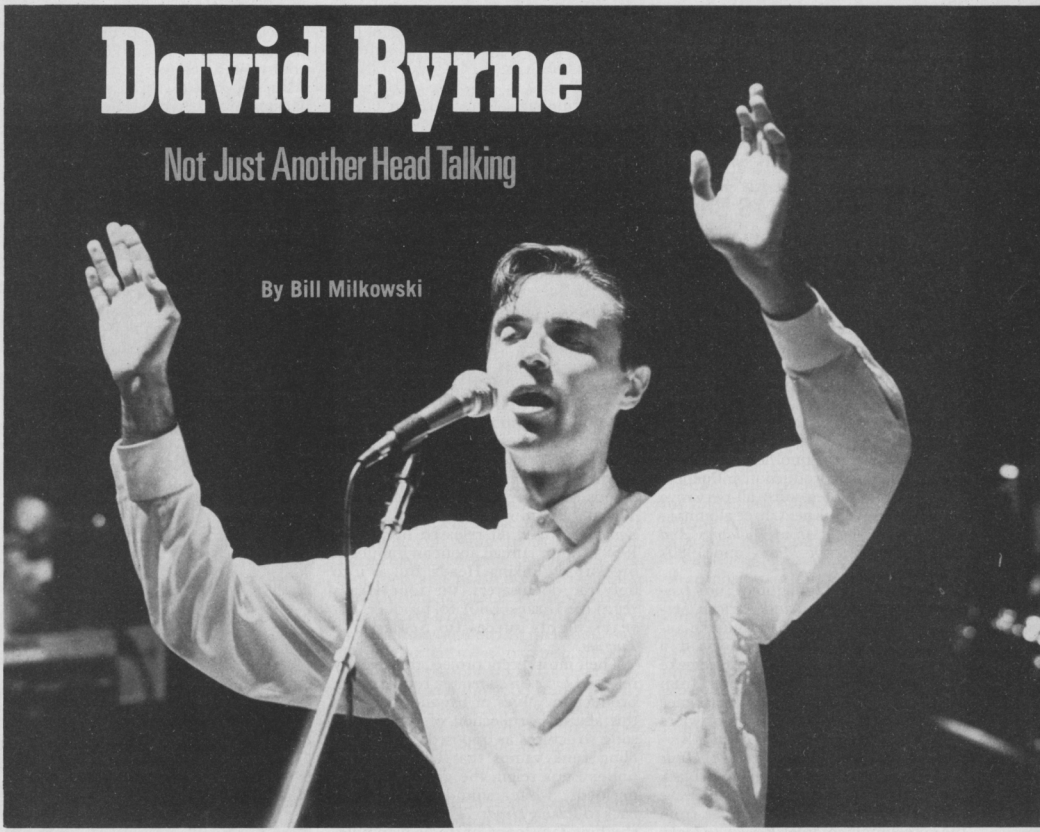
# David Byrne

## Not Just Another Head Talking

By Bill Milkowski



PAUL NATKIN/PHOTO RESERVE

Quirky guy, this David Byrne. Sort of skittish. Kinda shy. Slightly on the edge. Imagine Norman Bates fronting a rock band and you get the picture.

He buttons his shirts all the way to the top button. He speaks softly and hesitantly, seldom giving eye contact. He cultivates a look that wrestler Fred Blassie might describe as vintage pencil-neck geek. There has never been a rock star quite like this self-effacing Talking Head.

No macho posturings, no horny diatribes, Byrne defies all the rules of rock heroics. He sings about air, paper, governments, animals, and psycho killers in evocative, stream-of-consciousness lyrics that both fascinate and befuddle listeners. He just doesn't go in for rock cliches. In fact, the only time that Mr. Byrne ever uttered that standard rock & roll catchword "baby" was in the Talking Heads' most recent album, *Little Creatures*, their eighth. And that, on the tune *Stay Up Late*, was a reference to an actual infant, a toddler, not a full-grown woman. Clever fellow, this Byrne. Likes to avoid the obvious, it seems. He has all along.

### ART MAJOR?

It all started out innocently enough. Born in Scotland in 1952, he grew up in Maryland and studied art at the Rhode Island School of Design, switching his major from photography to filmmaking to painting to whatever else interested him at the moment. He played pop songs of the day on an acoustic guitar at coffee houses before finally forming his first full-fledged band, The Artistics, in 1973 with fellow RISD student Chris Frantz, a painter and poet who enjoyed drumming to Velvet Underground records. The band was later rechristened The Autistics. Funny guy, that Byrne.

He soon grew bored with school and split to New York, setting up a place for himself in the East Village. As he recalls, "I didn't graduate. I went there to get involved in visual art but I also wanted to get my money's worth, so I switched around all the time. There were some teachers who I thought were really good, and I did get something out of them. But the rest was more or less a waste of time."

Frantz followed Byrne to New York, bringing along his girlfriend Tina Weymouth, another RISD student. They formed the Talking Heads in late 1974, persuading Weymouth to play bass in the band. As Byrne remembers, "We thought it would be modern to have a female in the group who wasn't featuring her voice or breasts."

Their early performances at clubs like CBGB's and Max's Kansas City placed them on the cutting edge of new wave minimalism, along with other fledgling groups like Richard Hell's Television, The Ramones, Patti Smith's group, and Deborah Harry's Stilletoes (later known as Blondie). A cover story in the *Village Voice* in 1975 led to greater recognition and an eventual deal with Sire Records, the most ambitious label in new wave music at the time. By 1977, they adopted

a fourth Head, Jerry Harrison, a Harvard architecture student and former keyboard player with Jonathan Richman's original Modern Lovers. It's been a solid outfit ever since, with a revolving cast of supplemental characters, including synth specialist Bernie Worrell, guitarist Adrian Belew, percussionist Steve Scales, and various backup vocalists.

## A THINKING MAN'S BAND

There was a spare quality to early Talking Heads music, as exemplified by such crisp, uncluttered tunes as *A Clean Break* and *New Feeling* from the group's debut, *Talking Heads: 77*. Those early pieces had a raw, naive feeling about them that was refreshing in the face of the slick, glossy corporate rock music that was then pervading the industry.

By the time Brian Eno took the band under his wing, things began changing considerably. As the unofficial fifth Talking Head, Eno's production influences and personal tastes were all-pervasive through the group's next three albums—1978's *More Songs About Buildings And Food*, 1979's *Fear Of Music*, and 1980's *Remain In Light*.

These projects highlighted Eno's passion for polyrhythms and African percussion. Under Eno's Svengali-like tutelege, Talking Heads adopted a distinctly blacker sound. Their remake of Al Green's *Take Me To The River*, from *More Songs . . .*, attracted a black audience along with the usual following of white collegiate new wavers. *Life During Wartime* and *I Zimbra* from *Fear Of Music* became huge dance hits in both black discos and the burgeoning new wave dance club scene. *Once In A Lifetime*, from the exceedingly complex *Remain In Light*, solidified the Heads' crossover dance success, while the whole album had rock critics raving over its use of African-influenced rhythms. Before the British groups Bow Wow Wow and Adam Ant began popularizing the Burundi beat, Eno had already been there with his laboratory band, Talking Heads.

Though there was a certain amount of friction between band members concerning Eno's involvement in the overall group sound, Byrne remained firmly committed to the studio auteur. The two would extend these experiments with cross-rhythms and studio manipulation on their joint project, 1981's startling *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*.

By this time, Eno had clearly become a divisive force in the band. Weymouth and Frantz, in particular, were quite vocal about their disdain for Eno's tactics. One of the things that may have irked them was Eno's penchant for erasing a musician's track, then recreating it, Frankenstein-like, through a series of "manipulations and operations." As Eno related in a **db** interview (June '83), "What I like to do is to sort of extract from things, to take something and see a facet of that sound that I can make into another sound. I did this a lot with Talking Heads. For instance, I would take just the snare drum and use it to trigger one of my synthesizers, then feed it through a series of delays to make cross-rhythms. So a lot of the cross-rhythms you hear on Talking Heads records are actually from the original instruments but are treated in various ways . . . sometimes by running the tape backwards and delaying the sounds backwards so you hear the echo before the beat, and that kind of thing."

Weymouth and Frantz, apparently, did not see eye-to-eye on this issue of studio manipulation. Their answer to Eno's tactics was to cut their own album, *Tom Tom Club*. It was a simple, fun, straightforward collection of likeable tunes that scored well with record buyers and radio programmers.

Amidst all these side projects (Jerry Harrison's *The Red And The Black*, Frantz/Weymouth's *Tom Tom Club*, Byrne's ambitious score for choreographer Twyla Tharp's Broadway production of *The Catherine Wheel*, all released by Sire in 1982), rumor spread about an imminent breakup of Talking Heads. But as if to defy the doomsayers, the four Heads regrouped (sans Eno) to produce last year's highly successful *Speaking In Tongues*.

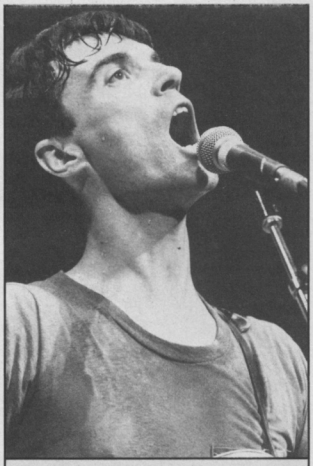
Their most recent project, the recently released *Little Creatures*, is a return to the production values of bygone days. For this album, a collection of simple pop song structures as opposed to the rambling funk vamps that had prevailed under Eno's reign, the group affects a decidedly whiter sound that harkens back to *Talking Heads: 77*. No more cross-rhythms, tape loops, or studio manipulations, the band is now content to play straightforward pop tunes from different American genres—the country & western-influenced *Creatures Of Love* with its whining steel guitars, the stripped-down 4/4 rock of *Stay Up Late*, the a cappella gospel intro on *Road To Nowhere* and its ensuing cajun influences. And what's more, Chris Frantz' snare drum is left basically as he played it in the studio—hard and solid, with no erasures, enhancers, or other Enoisms.

Yes, judging by the strength of *Little Creatures*, it's safe to say that Talking Heads is still very much intact. Some call it the best rock band of the decade. Critics have referred to the group as "a thinking man's rock band." Granted, they don't sell albums in the great numbers that, say, Prince does. But Byrne doesn't have to resort to wearing G-strings and grinding his pelvis in order to push product. He has a strong, loyal following. These Talking Heads fans appreciate Byrne's eccentric appeal and they admire his unpredictable nature. They know that the man cannot be pinned down. Yes, he is a Talking Head, but he is much more than that. His versatile solo career, in fact, threatens to one day eclipse his work with the mother band.

But for now, the two careers co-exist harmoniously: Byrne The Artiste and Byrne The Rock Star.

## WHAT, NO GUITARS?

One of the more startling side projects that Byrne did endeavor to undertake was *Music For The Knee Plays*. Released earlier this year on ECM, this collection of acoustic brass music caught critics by surprise and totally bewildered Talking Heads fans. Commissioned for Robert Wilson's nine-hour epic opera, *The CIVIL WarS*, the 12 songs on this provocative LP represent a drastic departure from the Talking Heads' familiar guitar/drums/



PAUL NATKIN/PHOTO RESERVE

### DAVID BYRNE'S EQUIPMENT

David Byrne's two main electric guitars in the studio are a Gibson 335 and a '64 Fender Stratocaster. On stage he also uses a Roland guitar synthesizer with a Boss digital delay, AMS digital reverb, Ibanez auto filter, and Boss compressor. He plays through a Roland Jazz Chorus amp. His at-home equipment includes a Tascam four-track cassette recorder, and an Emulator, which he uses for composing.

### DAVID BYRNE SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

**as a leader**

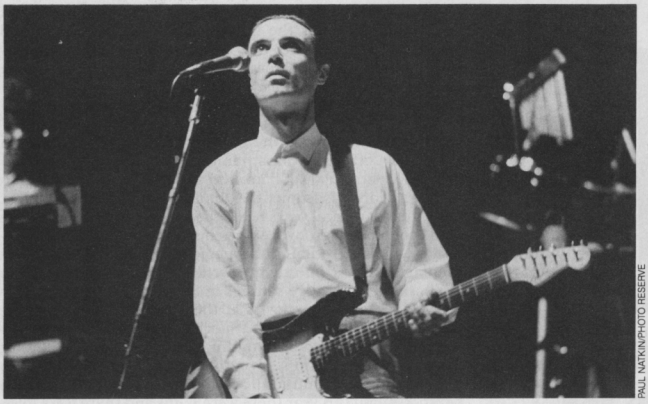
*MUSIC FOR THE KNEE PLAYS*—ECM 1/4-25022
*SONGS FROM THE CATHERINE WHEEL*—Sire 3645

**with Talking Heads**

*LITTLE CREATURES*—Sire 25305-1
*STOP MAKING SENSE*—Sire 25121-1
*SPEAKING IN TONGUES*—Sire 23883-1
*THE NAME OF THIS BAND IS TALKING HEADS*—Sire 3590
*REMAIN IN LIGHT*—Sire 6095
*FEAR OF MUSIC*—Sire 6076
*MORE SONGS ABOUT BUILDINGS AND FOOD*—Sire 6058
*TALKING HEADS: 77*—Sire 6036

**with Brian Eno**

*MY LIFE IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS*—Sire 6093



PAUL NATKIN/PHOTO RESERVE

bass/synth formula.

Both somber and celebratory, *Music For The Knee Plays* draws heavily from the traditions of American jazz and gospel hymns and is particularly evocative of New Orleans funeral marching bands. The inspiration for this music, says Byrne, came from the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, with whom he had rehearsed in New Orleans when the project was still in an embryonic stage.

"At first I thought it would be all percussive sounds," he explains. "I started working with the percussionists who do the music for Kabuki theatre in Tokyo. Wilson and I went over there for a workshop to plan out the staging and figure out what the movements would be for the play. So I thought I'd try recording some music with these percussionists. And it did sound great but it made the whole thing sound too Japanese-y. We were already using a lot of Eastern stage techniques and movement derived from Eastern theatre, and to add music that came from that tradition as well seemed to be going too far in one direction. So I guess as a reaction to that I thought of going whole hog in the opposite direction. I thought it would be a challenge to use music that was spiritual in a different sort of way. And that's when I thought of the Dirty Dozen."

As it turned out, the Dirty Dozen did not fit into Byrne's gameplan, though he did credit them on the album as being the original inspiration for the music. Apparently, the Dozen's rough-edged charm was at odds with Byrne's strict charts that called for clipped phrasing and percussive accents from the horns.

"Their way of playing and working is different than what this piece needed," says Byrne. "They're more used to head arrangements and music that came about as a result of improvisation rather than stuff that was written out. And I had to have it written out so that it would be more or less the same every night, for the purposes of the performance. And the way it's written, the individual expression is removed. It becomes a group expression. So we rehearsed for a while but that didn't quite work out."

For the recording and the premiere performance of the piece at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis last spring, Byrne employed some sought-after session reed and brass players, including Pete Christlieb, Chuck Findley, Garnett Brown, and Ernie Watts. "We held several auditions and picked them out," says Byrne. "We had to let go some of the guys who weren't as precise as I wanted. Because even with the good studio players they sometimes weren't used to playing as precisely as this thing required, since there was no piano or anything else to cover up any inaccuracies. It's left open and naked."

Essentially, the brass quintet functions as a kind of Greek chorus offstage, set up on an elevated platform of its own. The ensemble functions as a unison voice, offering staccato punctuation after Byrne's spoken verse in a kind of dry, quirky call-and-response. Byrne's ironic vignettes and witty wordplay against this fanfare recall the wry, incisive commentaries of Laurie Anderson.

## MR. MELANGE

Byrne, who doesn't read music, composed most of the material for *The Knee Plays* on an Emulator, then recorded the various imitation horn parts on a 4-track Tascam cassette recorder. When that demo tape was done to his liking he had someone transcribe the music so that he could provide charts to the horn players.

"About a third of the pieces on the album I didn't write at all," he explains. "I just chose old spirituals like *In The Upper Room* and *Where The Sun Never Goes Down* and re-arranged them. I first had them transcribed from a cappella records I had, so that each of the voices corresponded to a horn. It was pretty straightforward that way. The other stuff that I wrote, like *Tree* and *Social Studies*, were, I guess, influenced by that same tradition but also by people like Nino Rota [composer of several Fellini soundtracks]."

Pretty ambitious stuff for a rock star. Closer to Carla Bley than Bruce Springsteen. But then, Byrne has never been a conventional sort.

Mixing Kabuki theatre and New Orleans funeral music is just the sort of cross-cultural melange that has interested him all along. On *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* he and Eno mixed African polyrhythms with electro-funk, radio evangelists, Lebanese mountain singers, and Algerian Muslim chanters for a chilling effect. On the title cut from *Little Creatures* he blended crying pedal steel guitars and country & western twang with his own typically cryptic lyrics. On *Songs From The Catherine Wheel*, commissioned by choreographer Twyla Tharp for her 1981 Broadway debut, Byrne reaffirmed his fascination with African rhythms and percussion, punctuated by his trademark quirky vocals (described by one rock writer as the sound of a drowning man gasping for air).

But *Knee Plays* is something else. More dirge music than dance music, the album is decidedly less commercial than anything Byrne has done before. He'll continue making these side projects, getting involved in esoteric collaborations with other artists, dancers, and musicians, to satisfy the creative urge and his ongoing fascination with the cultural aspects of music.

"I have to keep asking myself, 'What is this music for? Where does it come from, what does it mean to people? What's its place? Why do I like it?' So I try to look outside of the music that I'm used to for the answers. I can't look at rock music in America very objectively anymore because I'm too close to it. And besides, I think that a lot of popular music has lost those elements that interest me. Rock & roll came out of the gospel tradition, for instance, but a lot of the passion went out of it in the process. And now it's become very diluted. So I inevitably end up going to music that is very foreign to me in order to find the answers to all those questions."

Gospel music, African music, Balinese gamelan music, Japanese music—David Byrne has become more a musicologist than a mere rock musician. "I seek out this other music because there's very different assumptions behind it, and there are overall similarities in some of these different types of music. It's a basic sense of passion and honesty that I'm attracted to. There's still some of that around. It is watered down a lot but there still is some of that quality hidden in some of today's music."

Passion and honesty—the very qualities that Byrne fans find in Talking Heads. **db**